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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000379

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P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY  
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DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN, BARGHOUT

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: ELECTIONS SNAPSHOT: BAALBECK-HERMEL

REF: A. BEIRUT 347

[1](#)B. 08 BEIRUT 1351

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (U) This is the fifteenth in a series of snapshots we will produce for key electoral districts ("qada") in the lead-up to the June 7 parliamentary elections.

[1](#)2. (C) Located in northeast Lebanon, Baalbeck-Hermel is Lebanon's largest electoral district. Baalbeck is known for its agricultural production, as well as the Temple of Bacchus, a UNESCO World Heritage site. The predominantly Shia district has ten MP seats, all currently held by parliamentarians allied with Hizballah and the March 8 alliance. Hizballah is confident of easy victories in the district, while the majority March 14 coalition has not actively campaigned there. Several "independent" Shia, however, do plan to challenge Hizballah's dominance by campaigning on separate lists. After the May 2008 crisis, Sunni-Shia tensions persist in the district and could impact the outcome of the elections if new incidents occur. End summary.

BAALBECK-HERMEL: A  
BRIEF OVERVIEW

[1](#)3. (U) Baalbeck-Hermel district is the largest qada in Lebanon both in physical size and population. The district extends north to south from the northeastern border region with Syria through approximately half of the Bekaa valley. The Bekaa region has most of Lebanon's cultivated land and agriculture production, including fruit trees and vineyards. There also is extensive cultivation of cannabis, which fetches higher prices than traditional agricultural goods. Baalbeck-Hermel is also the home of one of the best preserved Roman temples in the world and a UNESCO World Heritage site, the Temple of Bacchus.

[1](#)4. (U) Administratively, Baalbeck and Hermel are separate districts, but will remain as one for electoral purposes, as was the case in the 2005 elections. The electoral district has a predominant Shia majority (approximately 72 percent),

with significant Sunni (13 percent) and Christian (15 percent) minorities. The distribution of Baalbeck-Hermel's ten MP seats is as follows: six Shia, two Sunni, one Maronite, and one Greek Catholic.

FACTORS AT PLAY IN  
THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS  
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15. (C) Hizballah publicly portrays itself as confident in the district, while the current majority March 14 coalition has not actively campaigned there. In the 2005 elections, all ten of Baalbeck-Hermel's parliamentary seats were won by candidates allied with Hizballah and Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri's Amal party. Analysts expect that a similar outcome is likely for the June 7 elections, although there could be greater competition from "independent" lists.

16. (C) One such candidate list could come from former Speaker of Parliament (1984-1992) MP Hussein Hussein. Hussein was the only "independent" Shia MP until he submitted his resignation from parliament in August 2008 citing his complaint that the electoral redistricting agreed to in Doha in May 2008 did not move the system towards proportional representation (Ref B). Hussein, and his politically active family, have for the last several months sought additional support and candidates to compete with Hizballah's March 8 alliance (Ref A). Baalbeck-Hermel also is home to several large family clans whose support is seen as critical for election success.

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17. (SBU) In recent years, Baalbeck experienced violent clashes between Sunni and Shia communities, most recently during the May 2008 crisis. Tensions associated with Sunni-Shia or inter-family disputes could play a role in elections, particularly affecting voter turnout.  
SISON